

## **The “Pleasures of the Text”: Reading Mark Twain’s *Following the Equator***

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A literary text simultaneously asserts  
and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode.

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Mark Twain’s two-volume *Following the Equator* (1897) is a fascinating travelogue, displaying all the characteristic touches of the author: keen powers of observation, ironic commentary, scathing wit, and a vividly evocative narrative style. The second volume, which relates Twain’s trip to India, achieves moreover a fine balancing act: there is in it both a colonial discourse *and* its simultaneously oppositional subtext.

From the point of view of narrative form, *Following the Equator* is a traditional travelogue. In the second volume, places and people are narrated chronologically, in the order of Twain’s encounters with them on his journey through the subcontinent. The experiences of the author are made available to the reader through a narrator who is both homodiegetic (Note 1) and intradiegetic (Note 2). This is the subjective component of the narrative, its “ur-narrative.” On occasion, Twain employs, within the ur-narrative, other registers of discourse where he has recourse to other narrators. These are the diaries, reports, and memoirs of other authors to whom he has access. These help construct an Orientalist paradigm within the work, to be deconstructed by a subtext which the work also contains.

This article, focusing on the India component of Twain’s travelogue, its second volume, discusses three main aspects of it: its imperial discourse and Orientalist presumptions; its interrogative subtext which is oppositional to the imperial discourse; and finally, its narrative strategy that reorients and “frames” the reader’s “performance-as-reading.” I demonstrate how Twain’s narrative invites the “oppositional” reading and allows the author to produce a simultaneously anti-colonial and critical text in his satiric prose.

Twain’s paragrammatic (Note 3) text is informed by diverse sources, all firmly Orientalist in their presumptions. In the manner of any Orientalist text, the travelogue obtains both the source of information or hypothesis *and* the evidence for them from within the same paradigm: the Euro-centric, Western, imperialist one

(Note 4). *Following the Equator*, which purports to be an “observation diary” of Twain’s travels, is thus replete with descriptions that evidence his Orientalist bias. To locate this bias one needs to pay attention to the effective means with which Twain combines observation, fact, prejudices, and humor into an apparently seamless and “innocent” work.

With its “objectivity” and clear-eyed perception of reality, Twain’s narrative appears to be a historical tract. Twain employs to this end certain “shifters” (Note 5) to rework his prose into, and as the register of, historical discourse. Following Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes argues that such shifters mark all historical narratives. “Shifters of listening” provide the “elsewhere” of the discourse. This refers to all the sources and testimonies of the narrator (*The Rustle of Language* 128). These mention the events that are reported, the act of the informant, and the writer reporting it. *Following the Equator* employs numerous such shifters. As pointed out above, Twain uses diverse sources in his work. These stand as authorities—in their supportive act—for him and the reader. On Thuggee (Note 6) in India, Twain’s narrator quotes Captain Vallery, Philip Meadows Taylor and Major Sleeman, all of whom agree that the practice is evidence of India’s barbaric civilization (112, 125-136, 119-124). To understand the itinerary of a Hindu pilgrim in Benares, Twain refers to a Reverend Parker (174-179). In conclusion, and with the purpose of convincing the readers of the authenticity of Parker’s account Twain adds: “I know Mr. Parker, and I believe it” (183). The plague of Cairo is described through the narrative of Alexander Kinglake (74-75). The 1857 Indian “Mutiny” is faithfully transcribed from the accounts of Englishmen—G.O. Trevelyan, Capt. Birch, Holwell (250-265). The beauty of the Taj Mahal, while appealing to Twain’s aestheticism, has to be supplemented by the laudatory remarks of the English William Hunter (271-272). The topography of Mauritius is provided from an unnamed Englishman’s work (317-319). Thus, the “elsewhere” of Twain’s discourse, visible in the shifters he employs, occlude any “native” voice and offers only a Western, Orientalist view of India. It is in these shifters of apparently “truthful” historical tracts and their “validating” role/presence in later palimpsests (such as Twain’s work) that the reader locates Twain’s biases.

“Shifters of organization” are employed, according to Barthes, when the narrator modifies or revises his discourse in the process of explanations and arranges references within it. This narrative ploy may “mix up” chronology—the narrator’s and that of the event—in the space of a few pages, and produce, in Barthes’s words, a “zigzag history” (*The Rustle of Language* 128-129). Twain’s use of this mode of shifters is closely aligned to the shifters of listening, which, as noted above, provide the Orientalist context of his text. Twain first introduces characters and events to his readers and then undertakes a regressive movement in time to present a character’s antecedents. Thus, after introducing the reader to his manservant, the oddly named Satan, Twain serves the reader the conversation through which he had tried to ascertain Satan’s ancestry (42-44). Later, Twain witnesses a Parsi funeral procession. He describes the scene in detail before

dwelling, quite unnecessarily, on the historical origins of the dog's role in the ceremony (52-59). After describing the Hindu holy city of Benares, he provides the legends and myths surrounding the place (188-214). One notes that these shifters not only conflate time spans but also circumscribe the reader's credulity, since Twain's shifters only emphasize the ludicrous, the unbelievable, and the unverifiable. Also, interestingly, and looked at from the perspective of Western Orientalist depreciation of India, the reader realizes that none of these accounts are complimentary to India! Thus, while the shifters of listening provide the Orientalist framework, the shifters of organization inflect any witty comments or ironic appraisals of India with the traditional Western biases.

Evidently, the two types of shifters supplement each other in the narrative, which serves to reinforce the Orientalist discourse of the work. In fact, the ur-text itself of *Following the Equator* contains several illustrations of this discourse. Twain's perception of India as the land of (only) heat and dust constitutes a repetition of the Orientalist stereotyping. He refers, for instance, to the incredible level of noise which haunts all of India, describing it thus: "in the matter of noise it amounted to a riot, an insurrection, a revolution" (30).

Western writers from Thomas Roe through Edmund Burke and William Jones to Lord Curzon (who was contemporaneous with Twain) had always seen India as frozen in time. While acknowledging that India had once been a great civilization in the past, they believed that it had not progressed. (Note 7) This stereotypical perception of the static East, one which Said terms "synchronic essentialism" (*Orientalism*), is also Twain's image of/for India. India is seen as static (84); a frieze to be observed, admired and passed over; and a "moving show, [a] shining and shifting spectacle" (24), a series of "pictures float[ing] past . . . in a sequence of contrasts" (37). It is an "ancient civilization" whose near-visceral violence and energy contrasts sharply with staid England's "quiet elegancies . . . quiet colors . . . quiet tastes . . . quiet dignity . . . of modern civilization" (50). Thus, colors, activity, vitality, and noise are depicted as negative, primitive, and uncivilized values/features. The native is either an object of ridicule or pity. The native speaks an indecipherable, almost "pre-civilizational" tongue when s/he attempts articulation in English. This attempt of the native to speak English—itsself the product of Western education in India—created the image of the "Babu" in Anglo-Indian fiction, perhaps best represented by Rudyard Kipling's Hurree Mukherjee in *Kim* (1901).

Thus, Manuel's attempts to speak (frequently indecipherable) English in *Following the Equator* is one more example of the stereotype (42-44; see Sewell for an interesting reading of Twain's notion of language and its attendant confusions such as funny accents, mispronunciation, and the Babel of voices). The native's beliefs, religion, and superstitions all evidence his/her backwardness. Thus Twain ridicules the Indian's belief that dying on the near bank of the Ganges in Benares ensures

his/her rebirth as an ass. Twain perceives this belief as hilarious and quaint, and comments:

The Hindoo has a childish and unreasoning aversion to being turned into an ass. It is hard to tell why. One could properly expect an ass to have an aversion to being turned into a Hindoo . . . he could lose dignity by it; also self-respect, and nine-tenths of his intelligence. (188)

While acknowledging the exaggeration, one cannot fail to note the underlying discursive structure in operation where the native is treated as less than an animal (see Fanon for a discussion of the dehumanizing effects of colonialism, and the predominance of bestial imagery, as well as the reduction/comparison of the native to an animal, especially to reptilian forms of life). So, the native is simultaneously a figure of fun, ridicule, sympathy, anger, and the object of criticism. The native is therefore the ambivalent “false comedian” in Twain’s work (see Galligan for a superb analysis of the comic effect of ambivalent “false comedians” in Twain). Such examples of Twain’s Orientalist biases in *Following the Equator* could be multiplied

To sum up so far, Twain evidently operates from within the Orientalist paradigm. The reading of both the shifters of discourse and the ur-text of *Following the Equator* invite our interpretation of it as an Orientalist text. That is one essential aspect of the travelogue.

However, I suggest that the ur-text of the work is significantly subverted and undermined by an oppositional, or “contrapuntal” (to borrow Said’s term in *Culture and Imperialism* 59, 60, see also 36, 71, 79, 137, 216, 312) subtext. This is the second important aspect of the work. The oppositional reading is informed and invited by Twain’s narrative strategy that forces the reader to read the work as colonial, anti-colonial and critical. In this subtext Twain interrogates the very assumptions upon which he has built his travelogue. In other words, he refuses to accept “traditional” Western views of India and its civilization.

Twain’s text provides also many illustrations of this subversive element. These dissenting opinions are insinuated carefully as shifters of organization, usually in the form of witty or ironic remarks. Twain is careful not to appear overtly pro-native, but neither does he assimilate established opinions unquestioningly. For instance, he is suspicious of the recommendations of a fellow American with respect to the merits of a prospective servant. He writes: “In my experience, an American’s recommendation of a servant is not usually reliable . . . we speak of his good points only, thus not scrupling to tell a lie—a silent lie” (40). This remark, while significantly valorizing the good nature of the Americans, suggests that their opinions are not entirely trustworthy.

The stereotype of the dark-skinned native as barbaric has been a frequent image in Western writing about the East. The traditional association of black/dark with evil and of white/fair with goodness is questioned by Twain. He notes: “Nearly all black and brown skins are beautiful, but a beautiful white skin is rare.” Looking out through the window over a London street, he notes the white English “skins.” He computes that out of fourteen white skins, only two appear healthy and fine (63-65)!

A more significant critique of Western attitudes occurs in his discussion of Hindu religion and way of life. Twain’s passage is worth quoting in full:

We are always canting about people’s “irreverence,” always charging this offense upon somebody or the other . . . Whenever we do this we are in a lying attitude . . . for none of us are reverent . . . we despise all reverences and all objects of reverence which are outside the pale of our own list of sacred things. And yet, with strange inconsistency, we are shocked when other people despise and defile the things which are holy to us. (212)

The comments are a telling statement of Twain’s approach to the Western ideas of native barbarism and of the West’s own “civilization.”

Twain’s critique also targets the established Western (British) view that they were in India for India’s own good, and to save it, India, from chaos (Britain’s famous “civilizational mission” and “white man’s burden”). On the system of Thuggee, Twain’s narrator quotes extensively from Major Sleeman, who was responsible for the concerted British action against the practice. Major Sleeman provides detailed lists—of killings, victims, places, and police action. Twain creates the impression that he is fully in agreement with his fellow Westerners about this barbaric practice. Yet two, effectively counter-discursive, passages must be noted. Twain is quoting a Thug’s opinion from Philip Meadows Taylor’s account. The Thug argues that his pleasure of killing men was the “white man’s beast-hunting instinct enlarged, refined, ennobled” (124). Twain then adds: “we white people are merely modified Thugs; Thugs fretting under the restraints of a not very thick skin of civilization . . . we are gentle Thugs in the hunting season, and love to chase a tame rabbit and kill it” (125-126). He accepts that the West has made “microscopic” progress (126) beyond all this, but the passage remains as testimonial to Twain’s sceptic view of Western civilization. Later, comparing the philanthropy of rich Englishmen and Hindus, Twain claims in his apparently casual manner: “the rich Christian who spends large sums upon his religion is conspicuous with us, by his rarity” (191). These witty remarks are perhaps just that. However, by force of repetition these accrue into the status of a counter-discourse embedded in the text of ostensible Orientalist discourse about India. Hence I would like to argue that *Following the Equator* is not the “plainly” imperialist text it first appears to be.

We can now engage in the third, and perhaps predominant, aspect of the second volume of Twain's travelogue, ensuing from the first two aspects so far discussed.

When Twain undermines the authority of his Orientalist ur-text by writing a subversive subtext, he has effectively produced a "double discourse." This doubleness is also a narrative strategy in *Following the Equator*. We have already noted that Twain uses other texts and registers to create his text. The intertextual result produces a "double discourse." Wolfgang Iser, elaborating on the nature of such an intertext, argues that the borrowed segments shift relationships "both in respect to their own contexts and to the new ones into which they have been transplanted." This mixing, notes Iser, does not result in transcendence of either text, but merely in the production of a double-voiced discourse where "what is said ceases to mean itself but instead enables what is not said to become present" (218, 219, 220). When Twain's text presents traditional Western views on India he also conflates it with his own interrogative discourse. For example, we have noted above how Twain, after quoting British colonial authorities, i.e., imperial discourse, on Thuggee, also quotes a Thug. In quoting this Thug's opinion, Twain allows the suppressed voice of the Other (the native) to be heard. But this "other" voice, while referring to its own then context (of Thuggee), by the statements he makes also firmly destabilizes Twain's context of imperial discourse. Twain's statements, *supplementing* the Thug's (and agreeing with him), places the interrogative over the initial imperial discourse. Consequently, the contexts have merged to produce a Bakhtinian polyphony where none of the differences/voices is elided. This polyvalency makes *Following the Equator* a highly charged text with subversive overtones.

Twain's narrative strategy is itself "dual" in the sense that he combines two types of narrative styles to produce a polyvalent and subversive subtext to the main text. This subtext may be the anti-colonial one, or one of critical inquiry and insight.

The fact is that Twain's text frames a "performance" on the part of the reader through his narrative technique. To this end, he adopts a curious strategy of representation in *Following the Equator*. There occurs a wealth of description of Parsi rituals, railway carriages, animals, native dresses, architecture, the landscape, and the like in the text. Places, people, and events are all grist to Twain's descriptive mill. He follows up a vivid description with a casual witticism or an elaborately ornamental exaggeration. An illustration would be the description of the private carriages. After describing the carriage Twain comments: "Sometimes even the public carriages have this superabundant crew, slightly modified—one to drive, one to sit by and see it done, and one to stand up and yell—yell when there is anybody in the way, and for practice when there isn't" (24). The famous Twain description of the Indian crow is equally illustrative of his technique. He first lists various incarnations of the bird: "a gambler, a low woman, a blackguard, a scoffer, a liar, a thief, a swindler . . . a trading politician . . . a patriot for cash . . . a busybody . . . and a wallower in sin for the mere love of it" (31). Then he describes

realistically the gathering of crows on his hotel room balcony. After that, in all exaggerated seriousness, he tells us that these crows “talk about me . . . my clothes, my complexion . . . how I came to be in India, and what I had been doing, and how many days I had got for it, and how I had happened to go unchanged for so long” (33).

Another instance is when, after describing the infamous Black Hole tragedy of Calcutta (during the 1857 “Mutiny”), Twain tells us of Howell’s resilience. (Howell, legend has it, survived by licking the sweat from his sleeve.) Twain writes:

He [Holwell] presently found that while he was busy drawing life from one of his sleeves a young English gentleman was stealing supplies from the other one. Holwell was an unselfish man . . . yet when he found out what was happening to that unwatched sleeve he took the precaution to suck that one dry first. The miseries of the Black Hole were able to change even a nature like his. (219-220)

On the tragic siege of Lucknow during the “Mutiny,” the narrator details the British heroics in very ironic terms: “this impressive midnight retreat, in darkness and by stealth” (265). Describing the hunt in India, Twain is at his realist best with a battery of statistics, newspaper reports and all, only to be followed by exaggeration. The Indian government, Twain explains, in order to reduce the number of deaths by wild beasts or snake bites, killed 3,201,232 of them in six years (246). He then announces his aim to start a business: “one dollar for every person killed per year in India.” This business scheme relies more upon the snakes because the number killed by snakes is always consistent, and “the snakes transact their end of the business in a more orderly and systematic way than the government”(247)! Twain later claims that he killed sixteen tigers in India before being bitten by a snake. He then comments: “A cobra bit me, but it got well; everyone was surprized. This could not happen twice in ten years, perhaps. Usually death would result in fifteen minutes” (248).

Objective and factual narration of events is thus followed by exaggeration. Like the shifters of organization, Twain’s hypotyposis (Note 8) followed by ecphrasis make up the doubleness of his discourse. As we have seen in the description of the crow, the carriage, or the Black Hole, the ecphrasis (Note 9) suspends credulity, and no importance is accorded to verisimilitude. The illusion of reality in ecphrasis (which Barthes identifies as a feature of the Alexandrian neo-rhetoric of the second century A.D.) is only a “referential illusion” (Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* 132). Thus, in Twain’s text, the realist narrative entwines with, and into, an epideictic (Note 10)

one. The purpose is to bring about the reader's "performance" as explained below; a performance that is necessarily a feigning, a make-believe, or hypocrisy.

Twain's strategy is therefore that of realist narration and simultaneous fictionalizing. This act of fictionalizing possesses the "simultaneity of the mutually exclusive" (Iser 220-221). The world of the text may be seen as if it were a real world. Or, it may be bracketed off from the world it represents. There may be an oscillation between the bracketed world and that from which it has been separated. This reveals what has been concealed in the empirical world. The self-disclosed fictionality causes the recipient/reader to double (or doubt) and feign an accepting attitude (Iser 220-221). I suggest that Twain's hypotyposis, followed by ecphrasis, invites the reader to read his representations as fictions. If the world in *Following the Equator* is India, Twain's second order of discourse reminds the reader that this is only Twain's perception of India, historical/factual documents notwithstanding. This also reveals to the reader what objective narration does not. It serves an important function for Twain: critiquing both the Americans and India in the same narrative breath. For instance, Twain's witty comments in the case of public carriages provide a commentary on the social conditions (of wastage of labour, dirt and so on) in India. It helps Twain depict critically, as Iser would suggest, the "reverse side" of Indian reality without being *overtly critical*. Twain's text thus both asserts and denies the authority of his rhetorical modes—hypotyposis and ecphrasis—to make his text a dialogic one that engages the reader's attention. This dialogic nature of the text, whereby the reader is deliberately alerted to the narrative strategy, helps Twain reorient the reader to the subtext—whether the anti-colonial or the critical one.

The reorientation of the reader is predicated upon and achieved through the modes of narrative described above. *Following the Equator* is, as noted before, in the form of a diary of events. Therefore, generically, the informed reader identifies it as non-fiction. According to Gerard Steen, when the reader reads "declared" literature, s/he is alerted to the experiences of subjectivity, fictionality, polyvalence, and form-orientation (34-37). The reader suspends disbelief and indulges in a hypocrisy (feigning) by assimilating the make-believe world of the narrative. The reader is, in this case, ostensibly reading a travelogue of actual events. But as we have seen above, Twain's realistic accounts are inevitably concomitant with epideictic descriptives, thus making it both true-to-life *and* fictional. The reader is aware of the colorful imagery, symbols and metaphors that are clearly "expressive/evocative" and *not* "explanatory," to draw upon Steen's distinction (171). When, for instance, Twain describes a native's muscular body as possessing "rounded muscles" it is a hypotyposis. Then Twain adds in an extravagant, perhaps catachrestic (Note 11), metaphor, "as if it had eggs under it" (25). Here the metaphor is not used in the explanatory sense, but has extreme evocative power. *Following the Equator* has numerous such examples of evocative metaphors creating a second order of discourse in the reader's "performance."



Iser argues that representation is a performative act, unfolding itself in the recipient's mind, as a kind of textual production by the reader. Performance on the reader's part in reading Twain's representations consists in *re-cognition* of the ecphrasis, the double-voicedness of his discourse, the literary non-journalistic metaphorization, and the overarching problem of orientation. Twain deliberately engages the reader's attention with these strategies of narrative. The "aesthetic semblances" (Iser's term [220-221]) of Twain's text causes the reader to endow it with a sense of reality. The reader performs a reversal of this when s/he awakens to Twain's exaggeration, thus automatically placing his earlier realism under hermeneutic erasure. This is the hypocrisy of "performance" that unfolds with each "set piece" in *Following the Equator*.

The reader is perhaps left confused, in an ambivalent hermeneutic space. I suggest that this confusion engineered by Twain's strategy of realistic and epideictic discourse provides the vertiginous "pleasures of the text" (as Barthes termed the act of reading, and gave as title to one of his books, *Pleasure of the Text*). Twain "allows" the Orientalist comments of the Western paradigm to assert themselves. Then he alternates this discourse with a subtext of interrogative, anti-colonial ideology (Note 12). Finally, Twain "allows" the reader to accept his critical comments about India, when the narrative causes the reader's simultaneous assimilation into and feigned acceptance of Twain's world. The feigning reader therefore reads *Following the Equator* both as a journal with its critique of India and America *and* as a purely literary piece with perspicacious comments on India. The use of literary metaphorization and of the exaggerated style allows Twain to convey his views, and, more significantly, constantly engages the reader's attention. This movement between the dual worlds in Twain's narrative constitutes the reader's performance. Effectively, then, Twain himself frames the reader's hypocrisy and oppositional reading.

To conclude, Twain's narrative in *Following the Equator*, by delivering the "story" both as a "true account" and as fiction, forces the reader to perform an act of hypocrisy. The dual mode enables Twain to give us both an Orientalist-imperialist narrative and subvert it with his fictional subtext. The reader is alerted to the imperialist connotations and then called upon to suspend her/his belief in the same. The narrative thus manages to subvert its own rhetorical authority by the reader's "performance." The presence of the two texts (if we may term the imperialist and counter-imperialist narratives as two different texts) produces a tension that is unresolvable, and is precisely this tension that provides the delirium of reading Twain. If one may end with a pun: in *Following the Equator*, never do the twain meet!

## Notes

1 A single narrator focalizing the point of view.

**2** A narrator who is internal to the story, who is a character in the story that s/he narrates.

**3** Culled from several sources, but not necessarily in any order.

**4** Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (1978) has demonstrated this aspect of imperial discourse where both hypothesis and validation proceed from the same paradigmatic structures of thought. "Borrowings," such as Twain's, are part of the collective ideological structures that are manifested consciously or otherwise in literary works.

**5** A "shifter" is a term Barthes uses to discuss a specific narrative strategy (*The Rustle of Language*). As the rest of the paragraph demonstrates, I use the term as referring to narratological devices that perform certain functions.

**6** *Thuggee* was a form of banditry in seventeenth and eighteenth-century India. The thugs accompanied travellers on the long journeys (by road in those days), insinuating themselves as fellow travellers. Then, having won their trust, they would strangle the travellers using a scarf (usually knotted around a large coin for efficacy) and decamp with the money. They worshipped a goddess Kali, and saw their acts as devotional/semi-religious ones. Philip Meadows Taylor and Captain Sleeman of the British Army and the Police force were largely responsible for the eradication of this practice.

**7** Examples of this discourse of "stagnation" can be found in numerous British writings about India. The influential James Mill wrote in his *History of British India* (1817): "In beholding the Hindus of the present day we are beholding the Hindus of many ages past" (1. volume 483). William Jones wrote that "the original inhabitants [of India] have lost very little of their original character" (3. volume 31). *The Daily Mail* described the colonial procession in India as an "anthropological museum" (qtd. in Morris 132).

**8** Realistic description that seeks to present the scene "as it is" to the reader/hearer.

**9** Florid styles, rhetorical flourishes that are semantically empty.

**10** Set pieces of narrative that are meant for display and "showing off" rather than for purposes of conveying meaning.

**11** Wrested from the usual context and placed elsewhere, misapplied; the same as miscollocation.

**12** It might be useful to read *Following the Equator*'s "mixed" ideological structures—revulsion and attraction for India—in the light of Twain's other remarks on the country. In his autobiography, for instance, Twain wrote: "I think it was worth the journey to India to qualify myself to read *Kim* understandingly . . .

the deep and subtle charm of India pervades no other book as it pervades *Kim*. [India is] the only foreign land I ever daydream about or deeply long to see again” (288). It is interesting that Twain refers to that most ambivalent of Anglo-Indian texts, *Kim*, in his autobiography. Kipling’s tale has provided the source of much critical debate over its imperialist sympathy and indisputable expression of love for India. Perhaps Twain, like Kipling, combines his imperialist ethos with a critical dislike for imperialism’s deleterious effects. See *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*.

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